

This is a repository copy of *"Passed down like folk songs"; An Analysis of Story and Character in Taylor Swift's folklore and evermore.*

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/180852/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Thesis:**

Shaw, Liv *"Passed down like folk songs"; An Analysis of Story and Character in Taylor Swift's folklore and evermore.* Masters thesis.

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



**“Passed down like folk songs”; An Analysis of Story and  
Character in Taylor Swift’s *folklore* and *evermore***

**University of York**

**English and Related Literature Department**

**MA English Literary Studies**

**September 2021**

Student Name: Liv Shaw

Final Word Count: 15, 992

Referencing System: MLA

Tutor: Dr J T Welsch

*This dissertation is original work of the author and contains no work that has previously been submitted for assessment or published. The dissertation does not exceed 16,000 words, including quotations and footnotes, but excluding abstract, bibliography and plate/figure captions.*

# Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Abstract	2
Notes on Usage and Citations	3
Introduction	4
One Single Thread: Tying Song Structure Together	7
Staying in the Forest: Converging Storylines	15
Swindling Old Men and Dropping Glass Hearts: An Exploration of Character	23
The Maddest Woman: Taylor Swift as a Character	33
Conclusion	42
Works Cited	43

## Acknowledgements

I would first and foremost like to thank my supervisor, Dr J T Welsch, for not only wishing to help me take on this project but being so supportive throughout the journey. We both believe that this is a project “after our own hearts”, leading me to perhaps the most crucial thanks of all: Taylor Swift herself. Writing a whole thesis based upon music has proven both challenging but also incredibly fun, and it wouldn’t be possible without the creation of *folklore* and *evermore* – so thanks Taylor!

An overwhelming thank you to my best friends [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] who once again have acted as a support system whilst I panic and send over jumbled chapters. Thank you for making sense of my words, telling me to reference and being my favourite people.

The biggest thank you to my partner [REDACTED] who is tolerating minimal presents for his birthday due to it being the same day this project is handed in. For not bugging me when I’m attempting to write, for at least liking Taylor Swift a bit and for buying me chocolate when you know I need it. Also, thanks to our children/cats Lunya and Janette, just for being cute.

I would not have even got as far as postgraduate without my parents who have always encouraged me to follow my passions, even when they don’t quite understand (my mum can name one Taylor Swift song at best) but know it is important to me. The pandemic has certainly brought us all closer together, even geographically, and even though I know they may never read this, I am forever indebted to you both, alongside my sister, [REDACTED] and my stepdad [REDACTED]

## Abstract

This dissertation strives to explore the curation of stories and character in Taylor Swift's 2020 albums *folklore* and *evermore*. Swift's albums, created from "dreams" throughout the pandemic, explore individual characters and their stories in ways that previous albums released by Swift do not – through self-contained tracks, storylines running throughout an album that merge to create an overarching narrative, exploration of the negative aspect of celebrity and Swift's own personal life.

I will seek to thoroughly examine the stories presented and how they serve to establish both isolated characters with their own stories and also characters shared throughout several tracks. This will begin with the examination of structure on the two albums, with Swift using both linear and non-linear structures to portray the stories of the characters. Following this, I will analyse the converging storylines that feature across both albums in songs such as *betty*, *august*, *cardigan*, *gold rush*, *dorothea* and *'tis the damn season*. I will then move to focus on the use of character in stories, both fictional and non-fictional. The fictional characters examined will be nameless and their stories are self-contained, excluding similar themes, with all stories involved with tales of heartbreak and lost love. Finally, I will draw upon the idea of Taylor Swift herself as a character in the albums. Although Swift has previously used her personal life within her discography, she claims that the two albums were all about approaching music and storytelling differently, thus the way Swift appears across the albums and presents her personal stories contrasts to her previous work.

## **Notes on Usage and Citation**

Due to the dissertation's close examination of songs, a particular song will be cited once. In the event that the close analysis includes a citation of secondary material, the song will then be re-cited.

Additionally, Taylor Swift is cited various times for different works and interviews. The in-text citations for Swift's materials are organised chronology and will be cited as below:

Swift, 2020a – the album *folklore*, when referencing the album booklet, a page number is provided

Swift, 2020b – the album *evermore*, when referencing the album booklet, a page number is provided

Swift, 2020c – the Netflix documentary *Miss Americana*

Swift, 2020d – Taylor Swift and Paul McCartney's Rolling Stone interview

Swift, 2020e – *folklore: the long pond studio sessions*

Swift, 2019a – Swift's Tumblr post referencing Scooter Braun

Swift, 20219b – Swift's performance and interview for NPR's Tiny Desk Concert

Furthermore, many sources included are online articles and music and thus cannot be cited with a page number and will be replaced with a year.

## Introduction

On July 24<sup>th</sup> 2020, Taylor Swift released her eighth studio album *folklore*. Swift stated “a tale that becomes folklore is one that is passed down and whispered about... The lines between fantasy and reality blur and the boundaries between truth and fiction become almost indiscernible” (Swift, 2020a, 1). Released during the COVID-19 pandemic, the album encouraged the audience to embrace the lives of the characters and the stories told. The album also acted as a metaphor for the pandemic as a whole, with people’s worst ‘fantasies’ becoming a reality and the ability to distinguish false news from real news becoming difficult. Ann Powers of NPR stated “what is *folklore* if not a body constructed of memory, a shared sense of the world, built of myths, heard stories, much repeated stories and stories that change because people needed them to change” (Thompson et al, 2020), highlighting the links between Swift’s work and the pandemic whilst also acknowledging the universe of stories and characters Swift built. With Swift passing down the stories of characters she created in her mind, and thus sharing them with the world, it allows the stories and characters to become ‘folklore’ themselves, with academics, fans and music critics all theorising upon the meaning and sharing their musings with the world. Swift drew upon this in both an Instagram post following the announcement of *folklore* and the album booklet, stating “now it’s up to you to pass them down” (Swift, 2020a). With this, Swift is encouraging the discussion of the stories and characters she created on the album, suggesting it is an audience’s responsibility to spread their meaning rather than Swift herself discussing it. Lyndsey Mckenna recognised this, explaining “it’s really a record about stories and the way that we tell them to ourselves and to others” (Thompson et al, 2020), further developing the notion that *folklore* encourages the audience to embrace the stories of fictional and non-fictional characters and relay them,

Following the success of *folklore*’s release, Swift was decorated with awards for the album. These awards included Songwriter of the Year from Apple Music for Swift herself and, most notably, Album of the Year at the Grammy Awards. Swift is the first woman to win Album of the Year three times, and the fourth artist in history overall. Additionally, the album reception from critics and the

audience was overwhelmingly positive, allowing the album to become a timely topic for the basis of a thesis due to the popularity.

Swift followed *folklore* with a “sister album”; *evermore*, another surprise album released on December 11<sup>th</sup> 2020. Swift discussed her choice to release the album in the prologue of the album booklet; “it feels like we were standing on the edge of the folklorian woods and had a choice: to turn and go back or to travel further into the forest” (Swift, 2020b). Although Swift is referring to the sound of the album when referring to “the forest”, the meaning can also be attributed to the continuation of stories and characters. With both albums receiving widespread recognition for storytelling and character development, they offer an excellent basis for a dissertation based upon the same techniques with both albums still relatively new in a time where the world of music, and the rest of the world, slows down.

This dissertation will focus on the exploration and analysis of the characters created on *folklore* and *evermore*, as well as the stories told throughout the albums – both continuing and standalone tales that cover a range of themes such as infidelity, love, heartbreak and Swift’s own personal life. Swift identified the key themes of *folklore* in a 2020 interview, stating “when I was making Folklore, I went lyrically in a total direction of escapism and romanticism.” (Swift, 2020d). The theme of ‘escapism’ is conveyed throughout the albums, with reference to escaping to particular places, exemplified by *the lakes*, with an element of romanticism identifiable on almost every track. These themes serve to build upon character and story on the albums, as will drawing upon Swift’s discography. The inclusion of Swift’s discography will frame many arguments in the dissertation, with Swift choosing to embed references to her previous work throughout both albums (something Swift herself calls “Easter eggs”). The importance of drawing upon Swift’s discography is illustrated by both Nicky Watkinson - “Taylor Swift has always positioned herself as an author above anything else” (Watkinson, 2020) – and Taylor Swift herself in her 2020 documentary *Miss Americana*; “everybody in music has their own niche specialty... my storytelling is what it is for me” (Swift, 2020c). With Swift and academics recognising the storytelling skills Swift possesses and utilises throughout her discography, it is crucial to draw upon her discography to illustrate these skills and support references to her previous work



embedded within the albums. Furthermore, respected music critics and institutions will be referred to throughout the dissertation, as will academics commenting on *folklore*, *evermore* and Swift's work in general. The dissertation will also draw upon external media where relevant, such as social media posts by Swift herself, the prologues in the *folklore* and *evermore* album booklets and interviews including Swift discussing the albums. The consultation of external media will assist in the analysis of character and story and serve in gaining an insight into Swift's song writing process when curating these characters. Although the scope of works consulted is broad, the dissertation will not comment upon music videos and lyric videos pertaining to *folklore* and *evermore* due to both not offering additional readings to the music or developing the story and characters as thoroughly as over works cited may do.

Due to the recency of *folklore* and *evermore*, there is not a wide variety of academic materials to consult in reference to both the topic and Swift's music as a whole. This dissertation will serve to build on the lack of academic resources surrounding the albums and Taylor Swift in reference to the storytelling and characters used throughout her discography. Janice M. Del Negro and Melanie Kimball stated that "stories give us a sense of who we are as individuals, as people" (Negro and Kimball, 4), highlighting the importance of characterisation and story, and how the two are linked. Furthermore, this dissertation is intended to build upon the existing ideas Swift has conveyed both verbally and musically, assisting in defining the characters and stories that are included in the works. The main objective is to examine the methods in which characters and stories are created and recognisable on *folklore* and *evermore* whilst also highlighting the ways in which Swift writes both standalone and continuing stories for said characters. This will be determined by close readings, particularly when examining structure and fictional characters, as well as a broader scope of analysis when considering continuing narratives and storylines. In addition, academic criticism and research will be used to both support notions of Swift's storytelling, but also foreground when Swift makes unusual narrative and character choices that disagree with said research, thus highlighting that Swift places importance on the character and story first and foremost.

## One Single Thread: Tying Song Structure Together

Many songs in the musical world have varying structures, meaning many songwriters no longer rely on a simple and standard beginning, middle and end structure, with Adam Bradley stating of modern songs that “a taxonomy of storytelling pop includes numerous modes” (Bradley, 279), highlighting the varying and creative structures of songs within modern pop. The structure of a song significantly impacts the way a story is told, with linear structures leading to the clear telling of stories, whereas a different, creative structure can tell a more complex story that switches between tenses and characters. As a songwriter, Taylor Swift has often relied on a conventional structure for her songs with few experimental forms. However, Swift prided herself upon ‘doing this differently’ with her albums *folklore* (2020a) and *evermore* (2020b), leading to a large amount of experimentation in everything from structure to character. Bradley refers to structure and narrative as “not always a series of ordered events, nor is it always framed as a direct communication” (Bradley, 278). This is something Swift embodies in her 2020 albums with use of a regular present day beginning, middle and end structure alongside other experimental structures such as the use of flashbacks and, in some songs, there is almost no set structure at all. Bradley also draws upon this in his theories, explaining that “stories take on a range of forms and invent structures that deny conventional chronology” (Bradley, 278). The structure of songs on *folklore* and *evermore* vary from song to song, with the experimental sound and elements of character reflecting an experimental approach to structure. *no body, no crime* is an example of a formulaic structure often seen in Swift’s songs, as a tale is told in past tense from one point in time to present, whereas *invisible string* takes the form of a structure that utilises flashbacks with intermittent references to the present day, following Bradley’s definition of a more creative structure with the events not in chronological order. By applying Bradley’s definitions of structure, we can closely examine a song’s structure and the differing approaches on various songs.

*no body, no crime* is the sixth song on *evermore* (2020b) and details a woman avenging her best friend’s death. Before examining the structure and lyrical content of *no body, no crime* it is important to note that the song itself contains a country approach to storytelling. Zachary Arestad described country songs as “fundamentally narrative” (Arestad, 21) and, as the song is focused on

character – the character of Este, her husband and the speaker – as well as mystery, this allows the song to form a linear narrative with a clear beginning, middle and end. The stance that country music offers more plot and character description is also acknowledged by Bradley; “the plot-driven ballad is far less prevalent today than it once was in popular music, though it expresses itself vividly in country music” (Bradley, 297). As country music is historically more plot driven, the genre acts as a perfect setting for *no body, no crime*. Swift herself described country music storytelling as a “narrative device where this guy did this, and this woman did this, then they met and their kid was me” (Swift, 2020e). With this, Swift is referencing that country music often follows one character, leading them to an additional character which is followed by a twist in the tale. *no body, no crime* was sent to country radio in the USA, one of Swift’s first songs in years to impact country radio, highlighting the influence of country music and storytelling within the song. The structure of the song evidently follows Swift’s idea of a country song narrative with a linear focus, the inclusion of characters and twists alongside a stricter structure.

The song’s opening lyric repeats the sentence “he did it” (Swift, 2020b) twice which can be inferred as a reference to the two deaths in the song. This also immediately informs the audience that ‘he’ is guilty of something, with the song title already painting a portrait of crime in an audience’s mind. In Johnny White’s TEDTalk ‘We Are Our Stories’, he explains that the structure of a story has a clear “hook, more tension, climax” (White, 2011). Applying this definition of structure to *no body, no crime*, the opening lyric serves as the hook to intrigue the audience and draw them in to the story. The narrator begins to disclose details of her friend Este’s life, with an informal tone that is similar to how a person may gossip to their friends. Furthermore, the narrator attempts to emphasise her friendship with Este, stating “we meet up every Tuesday night for dinner and a glass of wine” (Swift, 2020b), highlighting that she saw Este weekly and it was unusual for her to disappear. By giving the audience additional background information, such as the narrator and Este’s weekly dinners and Este’s suspicions of infidelity in her marriage, the first verse’s purpose acts as a further hook in the song structure and marks the beginning of a linear song structure.

The chorus is repeated three times throughout the song – each time with alterations – as the narrator states “I think he [Este’s husband] did it, but I just can’t prove it” (Swift, 2020b). The meaning of the chorus changes each time it is repeated, with the first chorus stating that the narrator knows Este’s husband cheated on her but she has no proof, or “no body”, to prove it. At the end of the chorus, the narrator says “no, no, I think he did it”, further adding to the narrative theory that the structure of the song is the narrator explaining the story to others and firmly stating that Este’s husband is guilty.

The second verse in a story typically represents the middle of the story or, as Johnny White referred to it, “the mounting of tension” (White, 2011). After disclosing that her and Este meet weekly, the narrator states “Este wasn’t there, Tuesday night at Olive Garden, at her job, or anywhere” (Swift, 2020b). Although this verse serves to highlight Este’s disappearance, it also gives the audience an insight to the narrator’s character as she addresses Este’s absence from their dinner first before her absence from the whole day. The narrator continues, disclosing that Este’s husband “truck has got some brand-new tyres”, implying that he has replaced them to cover up something. The specific use of a truck *in no body, no crime* serves as a call-back to Swift’s earlier career in country music where she often referenced trucks on songs such as *Tim McGraw* and *Picture to Burn*. Stephanie Burt and Julia Harris theorised that folklore and evermore “are better understood as a nod back to her youthful songwriting tropes” (Burt and Harris, 2020), highlighting the reference to her country singer career in a song that falls within the genre of country. The notion of the song representing the narrator verbally telling a story can be further seen by the line in the second verse; “[the other woman] sleeps in Este’s bed and everything” (Swift, 2020b). The colloquial tone of “and everything” again implies that the story is being told as a form of gossip, further showing the nature of the narrator’s character. At the end of the second verse, tensions have mounted with the narrator suspecting Este’s husband of murder with the song still in the middle portion of the tale. The second chorus contains references to how the story is developing, with “I think he did it” now referring to the narrator believing Este’s husband murdering her. In addition to the new chorus meaning, backing

vocals are added stating “he did it”, further repeating the narrator’s assertion that Este’s husband murdered her.

The bridge, as with most Taylor Swift songs, forms the end of the middle section of the song with tensions reaching a peak. The narrator begins the bridge with “good thing my daddy made me get a boating license when I was 15” (Swift, 2020b). The narrator implies she has done something sinister on the boat whilst further developing her character, such as calling her father “daddy” and being privileged enough to earn a boating licence at a young age. This gives further credit to the idea that the story is being told by the narrator as gossip with aspects of her character, such as her view of her parents and her use of language, aligning with those of an American socialite housewife. She continues “I’ve cleaned enough houses to know how to cover up a scene”, implying that this is not the first crime she has played a role in. The bridge continues to reveal the narrator murdering Este’s husband, stating “good thing his mistress took out a big life insurance policy”, therefore giving the mistress motive to murder Este’s husband. With this, the story begins to come to a “climax” (J. Swift, 2011) with the big plot twist that Swift referred to as typical of country music storytelling being that the narrator murdered Este’s husband. This is followed by the final iteration of the chorus, again repeated; “they think she did it but they just can’t prove it”. The “she” the narrator is referring to people believing that the mistress murdered Este’s husband, despite no evidence being presented. Later in the chorus, the narrator states “she thinks I did it but she just can’t prove it”, highlighting that the mistress knows the narrator murdered Este’s husband. The title of the song *no body, no crime* comes full circle at the end of the third chorus as it is an American idiom meaning ‘innocent until proven guilty’, showing the audience that no one will be facing criminal charge. As the song reaches the end, it is evident that *no body, no crime* follows a strict linear structure with a clear beginning, middle and end and follows Johnny White’s theory of the structure of verbal stories, further highlighting that the narrator was relaying this story to a third party.

*invisible string*, from *folklore*, represents a creative song structure in which Swift’s current relationship with her partner, Joe Alwyn, and her previous relationships and albums are detailed. Swift explained the song, stating “I came upon the idea of fate... I love the romantic idea that every

step you're taking you're taking one step closer to where you're supposed to be, guided by this little invisible string" (Swift, 2020e). This highlights the structure of the song is guided by events, both past and present, to form a creative structure. Referring back to Adam Bradley's analysis that "stories defy chronology" (Bradley, 279), *invisible string* is not ordered chronologically nor is it a direct communication, differing from *no body, no crime*'s linear structure of relaying a tale verbally.

The song opens with "green was the colour of the grass where I used to read at Centennial Park" (Swift, 2020a). The use of the past tense noun "was" foregrounds that this is a reference to a past event which is solidified by the mention of Centennial Park, located in Nashville where Swift spent her teenage years. This is contrasted by Swift's account of Alwyn's life; "teal was the colour of your shirt when you were 16 at the yoghurt shop". These first two verses serve to contradict what Swift and Alwyn were doing at the same time, with Alwyn working hard and Swift reading and searching for love at a park. This use of the past is followed by a dive into present day in the chorus, highlighting the creative and non-linear structure of the song. Swift acknowledged the inventive structure of her songs on the two albums, with Zane Lowe pointing out that "[you] no longer follow the linear structure" (Lowe, 2020).

Similar to *no body, no crime*, the chorus for *invisible string* is repeated three times with adjustments. Glenn Fosbraey and Andrew Melrose theorise that "a song is there to capture what a poem cannot... a listening experience wound around melody" (Fosbraey and Melrose, 163). This can be applied to *invisible string* as the instrumental of the song sounds like a wedding song, purposely aiding both the lyrical content of the song and the structure by utilising not just the lyrics but the melody. The first chorus states "time, curious time, gave me no compasses, gave me no signs" (Swift, 2020a). Here Swift is detailed the mysterious world and how she never knew she would meet Alwyn due to there being no "signs" or direction. The chorus ends on the method of the titular invisible string; "isn't it just so pretty to think, all along there was some, invisible string, tying you to me?", highlighting that, despite their different teenage experiences, they were still linked and destined to meet. With the first verse taking place in the past, the chorus references the present, continuing the creative structure of the song.

The second verse features both the past and present, with references to the height of Swift's fame and career; "bad was the blood of the song in the cab on your first to LA, you ate at my favourite spot for dinner" (Swift, 2020a). In this verse, Swift is referencing her song *Bad Blood* (2014) and stating that, years before her and Alwyn met, he was listening to her music and eating at her favourite restaurants, thus linking them together once more. The verse then jumps ahead to 2019, again reinforcing the creative structure of the song. Swift states "bold was the waitress on our three-year trip getting lunch down by the Lakes, she said I looked like an American singer" (Swift, 2020a). As can be seen with the reference to 2014's *Bad Blood*, Swift is using a specific reference in order for the audience to pinpoint the time period of the events. The verse also contains the first reference to the Lake District, where the folklore track *the lakes* is set. By referring to *the lakes*, Swift begins a continuing narrative from one song to another, linked by place and person. Additionally, the use of place and person assists in continuing to establish a creative structure in the song. The second chorus is adjusted to "time, mystical time, cutting me open, then healing me fine". Swift refers to time as "curious" in her first iteration of the chorus, with time now being "magical" due to it leading her and Alwyn together. Furthermore 'time cutting her open' refers to her 2016 controversy with Kanye West and Kim Kardashian, which saw her become a hate figure by many members of the public. The beginning of Swift's relationship with Alwyn was prefaced by the feud, highlighting why, in Swift's mind, they are interlinked and she credits the relationship with "healing" her wounds.

Swift's references to her personal life continue in the bridge of the song, which is the only part of the structure that follows Johnny White's approach to stories, as Swift's song bridges typically represent a "climax" (White). Swift states that fate – or the 'invisible string – was "pulling me out of all the wrong arms right in to that dive bar" (Swift, 2020a). This is a deliberate reference to Swift's previous relationship with actor Tom Hiddleston, who is referenced multiple times throughout Swift's discography as being the 'wrong one' such as in 2017's *Getaway Car* ("I was lying to myself, I knew it from the first old fashioned we were cursed") and *evermore's long story short* ("clung to the nearest lips, long story short it was the wrong guy"). Swift is also referencing her song *Delicate* (2017), in which she sings "dive bar on the East Side" (Swift, 2017). The continuing referral to Swift's past in

the bridge is Swift utilising the metaphor of the 'invisible string' that led to her and Alwyn ending up together and allowing the creative structure of the song to continue as Swift draws upon her past and her present. She continues "something wrapped all of my past mistakes in barbed wire, chains around my demons, wool to brave the seasons". These metaphors are used to show how hurt Swift was before Alwyn came and comforted and protected her, with "one single thread of gold tied me to you", bringing the audience back to the present. The use of "one single" shows that Swift views the relationship as a result of luck and fate, with the reference to 'gold' contrasting the dark imagery of chains and a cold environment. Swift's references to her past serve the structure to portray Swift's narrative of how her and Alwyn were bound together, with the structure reflecting the purpose of the narrative.

The third verse continues to include Swift's past in her narrative that takes place in the present. She states "cold was the steel of my axe to grind for the boys who broke my heart, now I send their babies presents" (Swift 2020a). Swift is referring to her ex-boyfriend Joe Jonas, the only one of her exes to have a child. This contrasts what Swift has previously referred to as the 'old Taylor' and the Taylor singing their song, showing that, before Alwyn, she believes she was bitter and dramatic. Now, in the present, Swift views herself as forgiving and mature enough to send presents to her ex-boyfriend. This is important to the structure as Swift is continuing to switch between the past and present in order to convey a story. Swift also refers back to the first line of the song; "gold was the colour of the leaves when I showed you around Centennial Park". At the beginning of the song, Swift is alone in the park but, now in the present, she is showing Alwyn around the same park. Additionally, she first described the park as 'green', but not is 'gold' highlighting the difference between how Swift felt in her past and how she feels in the present, with the colour of gold typically representing riches and luck. Swift ends the verse with "hell was the journey, but it brought me heaven". Due to the song's creative structure, Swift has taken the audience on the same journey she feels led to her current relationship. The contrasting accounts of Swift's past and present experiences signify that the creative structure is crucial for the story Swift is telling.



The final iteration of the chorus begins “time, wonderous time” (Swift 2020a), again portraying Swift’s relationship with Alwyn as positive. The chorus continues “gave me the blues and then the purple pink skies”. This is an additional reference to Swift’s public feuds and when she was ‘cancelled’, hence her feeling blue. She is also crediting time with giving her Alwyn, with the “purple pink skies” referencing the cover of her 2019 album *Lover*, an album mainly about her love for Alwyn. Swift has utilised the creative song structure in *invisible string* to ensure that the audience is able to recognise the difference between her past self and her current self, and the different approaches to relationships – from bitterness to embracing an ex-boyfriend or making fun of her previous relationships. Furthermore, using two tenses to represent her different attitudes gives the audience an insight into her notoriously private relationship. Fosbraey and Melrose referred to this in *Writing Song Lyrics: Creative and Critical Approaches*, stating “the immediacy of the song lyric, the way it can capture a moment almost as it’s happening” (Fosbraey and Melrose, 161). The portrayal of Swift’s relationships in *invisible string* provides previously unknown knowledge, such as trips to the Lake District and trips to Nashville, with the structure allowing the audience to feel like these moments are happening in real-time due to the use of present tense and no previous knowledge, thus highlighting the necessity for a creative structure for the song.

To conclude, although Swift has previously followed stricter and more linear structures, such as the one examined in *no body, no crime*, a close reading of the two songs highlights how the structure used is necessary and plays a role in the storytelling and character aspects of the albums.

## Staying in the Forest: Converging Storylines

On the two sister albums *folklore* and *evermore*, there are 34 songs with the inclusion of bonus tracks. Whilst almost all tracks tell their own self-contained story, there are 5 tracks spread across the albums that have overlapping storylines: *cardigan*, *august*, *betty*, *'tis the damn season* and *dorothea*. Swift acknowledged these continuing storylines in a Q&A prior to the release of *folklore*, stating “one thing I did purposely on this album was put the Easter eggs in the lyrics... I created character arcs & recurring themes that map out who is singing about who” (qtd. in Jones, 2020). The character arcs apply to the five songs listed above, all linked by age, desire, and place. However, Swift interlinks many more songs on the albums together with as little as a small verse linking one song to another. Keith Negus emphasized this in *Narrative, Interpretation and the Popular Song*, stating that “songs exist in relation to other songs” (Negus, 370). This highlights that all tracks on *folklore* and *evermore* exist in the same world, dubbed by Swift’s fans as the world of “folkmore”, a portmanteau of *folklore* and *evermore*. In this chapter I aim to examine the canonicity and reality of the world of “folkmore” and the linking of stories on the albums.

The notion that “stories exist in relation to other stories” (Negus, 370) is exemplified by the tracks *cardigan*, *august* and *betty*, with the songs telling the story of three teenagers in a love triangle, going by the names Betty, James, and Augustine. On the album track listing, the songs are not in chronological order, nor are they close together in order, reflecting Bradley’s argument that “stories defy conventional chronology” (Bradley, 279). *cardigan* is a song that is “20 to 30 years later” (Swift, 2020e) from the perspective of the character of Betty, with *august*, the eighth track, taking place in both the past and the present from the perspective of Augustine and Betty from the perspective of James taking place in the present as the fourteenth track. The notion that Swift is writing the love triangle from the perspective of each track links with Burt and Harris’s statement that “everything’s [on *folklore* and *evermore*] a return to something, a rewrite, a re-take, a retraction” (Burt and Harris, 2020). This highlights that the return to the arc of the love triangle gives the audience each person’s feelings on the situation and their story, which is crucial to the albums as Swift continually refers to the tracks as a group of stories.

Chronologically, *august* symbolises the beginning of the love triangle and represents Augustine's view and her side of the story as what may be viewed as 'the other woman', due to Betty and James's existing relationship. The story is carefully crafted so as to not represent any indication of the status of the relationship. However, in the chorus, the use of the of the past tense verb "slipped" (Swift, 2020a) and the past tense use of "was" highlight that the relationship that the song represents is over. Additionally, the first verses give the audience a look into the character of Augustine, with the use of "whispers" and "I never needed anything more" indicating that this is a character who is in love and feels content in her relationship. This juxtaposes the chorus, with "August slipped away into a moment in time" holding a double meaning; due to the relationship taking place in the summer months, August ended, as did the relationship. However, it can also mean that the person Augustine became just a memory to her partner, James. The relationship is also presented as very intimate, with "whispers" and the two lovers being "twisted in bedsheets". It is also important to note that, until *betty*, we do not know how old the three characters are, with *august* giving the first indication that they are young with "will you call when you're back at school?". However, it is crucial to note that Augustine states when "you're" back at school, not "we're", showing that Augustine may be older than James and does not directly know Betty. Another aspect of the relationship that is carried over throughout the trilogy of songs, and extends to *dorothea* and *'tis the damn season*, is the unhealthy and toxic relationship that both Betty and Augustine experience with James. Augustine states that "living for the hope of it all, cancel plans just in case you'd call, and say 'meet me behind the mall'" (Swift, 2020a). Augustine becoming a reclusive character whose day hinges on if James calls for a secret meeting, going out of his way to hide his relationship with her, shows an unhealthy relationship.

In the trilogy, *betty* comes next and is from the viewpoint of James. Just as *august* briefly mentions things that give away the trio's age, such as school, James repeatedly mentions things that make them seem young, such as "homeroom" and "riding on my skateboard" (Swift, 2020a), things that typically teenagers do. However, in *betty*, James is doing it with the purpose of excusing his behaviour due to his age. An example of this is when he states "I'm only seventeen, I don't know anything". By

playing down his intelligence and blaming his actions on his age, James is attempting to manipulate Betty into resuming their relationship. James is further portrayed as a ‘villain’ in the story by attempting to shift the blame onto Betty and Augustine. He states of Betty “I saw you dance with him”, hinting that his actions were caused by her dancing with another man. He states of Augustine “just thinking of you when she pulled up, like a figment of my worst intentions, she said ‘James, get in, let’s drive’”. His blaming of the female characters is James attempting to deflect blame for his actions, hinting he was forced to do it because of how the girls acted. This further highlights the young age of trio and also contrasts to Augustine, who spent August mourning the loss of her relationship singing “I never needed anything more” whilst James states he “slept next to her [Augustine] but I dreamt of you all summer long”, showing his duplicitous nature. However, in a contrast to Swift’s previous songs such as *Better Than Revenge* (2010), Betty and Augustine never blame each other for the infidelity experienced. Swift addressed this in the *folklore: long pond studio sessions* explaining that “the idea that there’s some bad villain girl in any type of situation that takes your man is actually a total myth because that’s not usually the case at all” (Swift, 2020e). The unity of Betty and Augustine is a contrast to *Better Than Revenge*, a song in which Swift blames a girl for stealing her boyfriend, stating “she took him faster than you could say sabotage... she’s not a saint and she’s not what you think” (Swift, 2010). This highlights not only the feminist attitudes of Augustine and Betty, but also Swift’s growth as both a writer and a person for not demonising the women featured in her songs.

The final track in the trilogy *cardigan* is from the perspective of Betty decades after the love triangle with James and Augustine. The track is the second song on the album, meaning the audience interacts with Betty’s story first before becoming familiar with the other characters. As an adult, Betty states “when you are young, they assume you know nothing” (Swift, 2020a), referencing the clear age references on *august* and *betty*. With this, Betty is refusing to excuse James’s behaviour on his age as he clearly knew what he was doing despite being “only seventeen”. Additionally, the first two choruses address things James did with Augustine and what he did with Betty, for example “Dancing in your Levi’s, drunk under a streetlight” referencing James’s walk home in *betty*; “I was walking

home on broken cobblestones”. This is contrasted by more intimate accounts of James and Betty’s relationship such as “hand under my sweatshirt, baby kiss it better”. This shows Betty, when reflecting upon her past, views her relationship with James as loving and intimate, whereas his relationship with Augustine is viewed as a few encounters, probably due to what he told her. Betty also references James “playing hide-and-seek”, likely referring to when James told Augustine to “meet me behind the mall”, as he was hiding from Betty and the view of others. The metaphor of the chorus “and when I felt like I was an old cardigan under someone’s bed, you put me on and said I was your favourite” represents James choosing Betty over Augustine, and how she felt discarded prior to that. Additionally, the specific reference of a cardigan is also used in *betty* when James states of Betty “standing in your cardigan”. Age is referenced again with the line “I knew you, tried to change the ending, Peter losing Wendy”. Famously, Peter Pan let Wendy leave Neverland as he refused to grow up, which gives the audience an insight into the fate of Betty and James’s relationship, with James perhaps cheating on Betty again. By trying to change the ending, James was attempting to keep the Betty without fully committing to her, but she recognised this, again leading to an unhealthy relationship dynamic. This line paired with the bridge of “you drew stars around my scars, but now I’m bleeding” highlights that Betty trusted James with her deepest secrets, her ‘scars’, and he helped her heal them, however he has now opened them right back up again.

*cardigan*, though the first song of the trilogy on track list, serves as final track to wrap up the love triangle storyline. As Betty reflects upon her relationship with James, it is clear it is a bittersweet memory for her as the story is told in past tense. As previously mentioned, it is clear that Betty and James did not stay together long after their potential reunion at the end of *betty*. Betty explains that the relationship “marked me like a bloodstain” (Swift, 2020a), showing that, no matter how much she tries to move on, she is often reminded of their relationship as it ‘marked’ her internally, hurting her deeply. Furthermore, the past tense of use of “I knew you” implies that Betty did know him at one time but did not keep contact. Another thing that assists in determining the outcome of the storyline is Taylor Swift’s *folklore* and *evermore* playlists that she uploaded onto streaming services. The playlists, often named after a line in one song, group together thematically similar songs. Crucially,

cardigan appears on “*the escapism chapter*”, joined by *the lakes*, *seven*, *epiphany*, *mirrorball* and *exile*. Although some songs on the playlist tell stories about running away, such as *the lakes* and *seven*, other songs on the playlist are stories reminiscing of times gone by, just as cardigan does. Keith Negus acknowledged the need to examine paratextual elements to understand storytelling and narrative, stating “the application of narrative theory to popular music must inevitably and fruitfully move beyond the world of the text and allied media to a much wider universe.” (Negus, 369). Negus’s statement emphasises that these paratextual elements exist in a wider context, as does the idea of the ‘folkmore’ universe with the interlinking stories that continue throughout cardigan, betty and august. It is thus important to consider both the continuing storylines and additional media, such as the streaming playlists curated by Swift, in order to understand the stories of Betty, James and Augustine.

*folklore* does not mark the end of Betty, James and Augustine’s stories as Swift released the sister album *evermore*. As there were continuing stories running through various songs on *folklore*, it was inevitable that this would be extended on evermore also. With Swift stating “I want to stay in the forest” (Lowe, 2020) to represent her willingness to keep writing stories of fictional characters, it is clear that she wished to link her characters together to folklore and they too would remain in the forest. The expansion of the Betty, James and August storyline comes in the form of the songs ‘*tis the damn season* and *dorothea*. Although Swift briefly acknowledged the link on a Q&A (qtd. in Mylrea) before the release of *evermore* in 2020 (“there’s not a direct continuation of the betty/james/august storyline, but in my mind, Dorothea went to the same school as Betty and James”), thematically the songs are very similar with the storyline in both songs discussed a lost love and the consequences of returning to it. This mirrors Augustine and Betty’s stories and how they reminisce throughout cardigan and august. *dorothea* prefaces ‘*tis the damn season* and tells the story of two lovers, Dorothea and an unnamed character, and the consequences of Dorothea leaving her hometown to pursue a career in acting. Similar to *august*, *cardigan* and *betty*, the story is not told chronologically with ‘*tis the damn season* being the fourth track on evermore and is about Dorothea’s return, followed by *dorothea* on track eight. Swift describes the two tracks as “Dorothea, the girl who left her small town to chase her Hollywood dreams – and what happens when she comes back for the holidays and

discovers an old flame” (Swift 2020b, 1), thus giving the set chronological order of events. *dorothea* establishes the relationship between Dorothea and the narrator, with Dorothea leaving the narrator longing for her, portrayed by “you’ll always know me Dorothea” and “it’s never too late to come back to my side” (Swift, 2020b), highlighting the narrator is still interested in Dorothea despite her leaving to pursue her acting dreams. In the *folklore: long pond studio sessions*, Swift explains “in folklore there are a lot of songs that reference each other or lyrical parallels” (Swift, 2020e) which is something that continues on evermore as the narrator of *dorothea* is left pining for Dorothea in a similar way that Augustine was pining for James when he left her, highlighting a lyrical parallel in the two interlinked stories. However, Dorothea eventually returns to the narrator whereas James does not return to Augustine, portraying the difference in their stories.

As Swift previously stated, “*folklore* [and in turn *evermore*] have a lot of lyrical parallels” (Swift, 2020e), particularly evident in *’tis the damn season* which references many events told in *dorothea*, but the story is told from Dorothea’s perspective. One example of this is the opening verse, in which Dorothea states “if I wanted to know, who you were hanging with while I was gone, I would’ve asked you” (Swift, 2020b) acting as a parallel for the narrator in *dorothea*’s concern of her friends using for “who she knows” and insinuating that they are fake. This highlights a difference in character, with Dorothea initially acting closed off to the narrator whilst, in *dorothea*, he pines for her, thus following the pattern of lyrical parallels established on *folklore*. Additionally, Dorothea states in *’tis the damn season* “if it’s all the same to you, it’s the same to me”, with the narrator in *dorothea* explaining “this place is the same as it ever was”. This portrays that not only the two songs are linked but also Dorothea wishes to mirror the narrator’s feelings in order to connect to him, offering both a connection for the characters and the story. The theme of lyrical parallels continues in *’tis the damn season*, with Dorothea’s behaviour as a character mimicking the child-like behaviour of James in the love triangle on *folklore*. This is referenced several times in *’tis the damn season*, such as Dorothea stating “you could call me ‘babe’ for the weekend”. The narrator in *dorothea* pines for her to come home and be with him, however when Dorothea returns, she is only staying temporarily, thus offering a parallel between Dorothea and the narrator and James’s treatment of Augustine, despite it appearing

Dorothea does care for the narrator. This is further developed with the verse “you can run, but only so far” being comparable to Betty’s statement of James in *cardigan*; “I knew you, leaving like a further, running like water” (Swift, 2020a). James and Dorothea are two characters on *folklore* and *evermore* that continually attempt to ‘escape’ from the people they say they love; however, they are duplicitous in nature – Dorothea left her love to chase her dreams and James cheated on Betty, thus they do not really love the other characters but are using them for their own gain, with their stories acting as parallels. Dorothea confesses at the end of the track that she will “go back to LA, and the so-called friends who’ll write books about me” (Swift, 2020b). Although the narrator of *dorothea* draws attention to her “so called friends” (“you got shiny friends...if you’re ever tired of being known for who you know”), it adds to the selfishness of Dorothea’s character that she would rather return to chase her dreams and be surrounded by false friends than stay in the town with someone who loves her. The characterisation of Dorothea in both *‘tis the damn season* and *dorothea* highlights Dorothea as a character focused on herself and not love, similar to James on *folklore*.

In addition to the continuing storylines on the album, many songs reference each other in small, almost missed, verses to further extend the universe the tracks exist, with Swift acknowledging the purposeful references in the *folklore: the long pond studio sessions* as previously cited. The *‘tis the damn season* verse “the road not taken looks real good now” (Swift, 2020b) is reminiscent of the *illicit affairs* verse “take the road less travelled by, tell yourself you can always stop” (Swift, 2020a), with both verses telling the story of a faded love. The sharing of verses and metaphors across the albums adds to the storytelling as it confirms that the story of the character, be it Dorothea or Betty or Augustine, is true and occurred in the same world as the track it is referenced in. Similarly, the *coney island* verse “we were like the mall before the internet, it was the one place to be” (Swift, 2020b) shares similarities with August meeting James behind the mall in secret – both songs use place to tell the story of a romantic relationship. *coney island* is using the mall as a metaphor to portray as status as a strong couple that the characters once were, in contrast to the use of the mall in *august* being to hide any encounters between Augustine and Dorothea. *evermore*’s *gold rush* also features several references to *folklore*, such as “my mind turns your life into folklore” (Swift, 2020b). This marks the



first time the word ‘folklore’ features on either album and is used to convey the character’s unrequited love for someone, turning their life into an imaginary tale as the character does not know their love interest well. The further reference by the title “gold rush” is linked to *invisible string*’s main motif of Taylor Swift and Joe Alwyn being fated to meet and being tied together by a “one single thread of gold” (Swift, 2020a). This is a contrast to the use of gold in *gold rush* as, although the colour gold normally signifies wealth and luck as it does in *invisible string*, the character acknowledges several times how her and her love are fated to not be together, stating “it could never be” (Swift, 2020b). This again enforces the parallel stories that are told across the two albums and how their stories converge despite being thematically different.

Swift stated that the stories on *folklore* occupy themselves with “conflict resolution, trying to figure out how to get through something, or confessions, or communication” (Lowe, 2020). This is evident in the love triangle conveyed throughout *betty*, *august* and *cardigan*, with the character of Augustine’s story focusing on her getting through her heartbreak whilst James confessed his regret to Betty. In contrast to the conflict resolution on *folklore*, *evermore* “deals a lot with endings, a relationship, a friendship, something toxic” (Lowe, 2020), conveyed in *’tis the damn season* and *dorothea* with the end of Dorothea’s relationship with the narrator occurring twice. Furthermore, it is clear that Swift intended to purposely link stories together. However, in order to link the “sister” albums together, Swift curated an extended universe for the two albums to exist in, with all stories being canonically linked and their narratives converging.

## Swindling Old Men and Dropping Glass Hearts: An Exploration of Character

Contrary to the majority of her previous work, Taylor Swift included many fictional characters and stories on *folklore* and *evermore*. Previous examples of her doing this in practice are sparse, with the most notable being *Starlight* (2012), an account of Ethel and Bobby Kennedy's relationship, and *Death by A Thousand Cuts* (2019) that was inspired by films and her friend's breakup. Swift acknowledged her fictional writing for *Death by a Thousand Cuts* in a 2019 interview; "I was having a lot of conversations about breakups... this all culminated in me waking up one day with all these heartbreak lyrics in my head" (Swift, 2019b), highlighting how Swift drew inspiration from her surroundings rather than her personal life to write the song. It is evident that the curation of character and fictional storytelling is something Swift wished to explore more, as *folklore* was released less than a year after she gave this interview. Swift discussed her embracing more fictional stories, stating "this was the first album where I've let go of that need to be 100% autobiographical... there's so much more to writing songs than just what you're feeling in your singular storyline" (Swift, 2020e). By using familiar themes, Swift stated she was able to "create characters in this mythological American town or wherever I imagine them and I can reflect my own emotions onto what they might be feeling I can create stories and characters and arcs". Swift curates the stories and narratives of a wide variety of characters on tracks that will be closely examined in this chapter to establish how storytelling assists in successfully creating a discernible character.

*ivy* tells the tale of a married woman engaging in an affair, with the title itself referring to poison ivy; a poisonous plant that can kill you if you are too close – a metaphor for the affair the main character embarks upon. Although Swift has explored betrayal, both personal and fictional, within her music prior to *folklore* and *evermore*, it has regularly been from a perspective of the betrayed. This allows the tales told on the albums to be open to interpretation and discussion rather than a clear answer to who is a 'good' character and who is a 'bad' character. Donna W. Emery drew upon this, theorising that "understanding characters is essential for comprehending the story as a whole"

(Emery, 534), again emphasising that Swift is allowing the audience their own decisions about the characters due to tracks on the albums acting almost as a character study.

The track opens with the immediate introduction of the protagonist meeting her lover and attempting to excuse the situation she has gotten herself in to, stating “how’s one to know, I’d meet you where the spirit meets the bones?” (Swift, 2020b). With this, the character is acting blameless and questioning how she was meant to foresee she was fated to meet her lover. Additionally, the use of the metaphor “where the spirit meets the bones” represents a graveyard and shows that, whilst others were there to mourn their loss of love, the protagonist was striving to achieve love with her new partner, representing the death of her marriage. Furthermore, the portrayal of snow (“In from the snow”) mirrors the character’s love life, with a cold setting used to represent a cold and loveless marriage that the protagonist strays from. In contrast to the cold imagery, the protagonist states “your touch brought forth an incandescent glow”. The juxtaposition of the “snow” and a “glow” foreground that her affair has awakened her and made her happy again. However, the character refers to the glow as “tarnished but so grand”, with the character acknowledging that her relationship with her lover is already damaged as it was built on the grounds of betrayal, but it makes her happy that she is going to continue. The entirety of the first verse established the background of the affair and the two meeting, adding to the curious nature of the character as she was “grieving for the living”, meaning the character met her lover whilst she was mourning the death of her marriage, despite having no plans to split from her husband.

The chorus continues the development of the character with “oh, goddamn” (Swift, 2020b). On *folklore* and *evermore*, Swift has not been cautious about using expletives, with *folklore* being her most explicit album to date. This adds more detail to the protagonist’s character, that she feels she cannot even curse thus curating an image of a more subdued, respectful woman. The verse also serves as an expression of regret from the protagonist wishing she was not married and could embrace her new relationship. This is further exemplified with “taking mine, but it’s been promised to another” which creates specific imagery of her lover holding her hand despite promising her hand in marriage to her husband. This is followed by “oh, I can’t, stop you putting roots in my dreamland”. The pause

between “I can’t” and “stop” offers a double meaning to the story, with the protagonist seemingly tell her lover she cannot participate in the affair (“I can’t), with an additional reading being that the protagonist feels she can’t stop seeing her lover, presenting the character as indecisive. Furthermore, the imagery used during the chorus with “putting roots in my dreamland” portrays the protagonist’s lover as deeply rooted within her thought and her mind, and her feelings are still growing. The nature imagery continues throughout the chorus; “my house of stone, your ivy grows, now I’m covered in you”. The portrayal of the character’s “house of stone” indicates that she built walls to protect herself from being hurt, but now her lover is on the cusp of being let in. In addition, the notion that the character is “covered” in her lover highlights her infatuation with him.

*ivy* also features significant use of juxtaposition to demonstrate the protagonist’s indecisive nature. One example of this is the use of “magnificently cursed” (Swift, 2020b). The contrast between what the protagonist believes to be a ‘magnificent’ relationship and the idea that both parties are cursed due to the infidelity element of their relationship highlights that they will be condemned for their affair. The protagonist also states “he’s in the room”, the “he” referring to her husband. This expands upon the affair as it details that the protagonist, her husband and her lover are in the same social circle, meaning that her husband is familiar with her lover and furthers the notion that they will be condemned due to both parties of the affair having an association with the protagonist’s husband. However, despite the protagonist’s worries, there is an underlying element of mischief to fact that her husband is in the room. The protagonist’s experience of mischief is paired with her growing infatuation with her love, stating “he [her husband] wants what’s only yours”. Despite the conventional idea that a wife’s love should only be given to her husband, the story offers a twist as the protagonist aligns her love to her lover rather than her husband. Furthermore, the verse offers the audience an insight into the protagonist’s marriage and, whilst it was previously hinted that the marriage is loveless, the protagonist is explicitly stating that her husband still “wants” her again, further highlighting a contrast between the protagonist’s version of events and the truth and adding to her character as an unreliable narrator.

The bridge utilises place to progress the tale, after the first verses referenced “snow” to signal it was Winter; “clover blooms in the fields, spring breaks loose, the time is near” (Swift, 2020b). The beginning of the bridge further develops the natural imagery that has featured thoroughly throughout the story, such as the use of a “clover” alluding to a four-leaf clover, traditionally a sign of luck. The inclusion of a clover again offers two meanings – either the protagonist feels lucky she has found her lover, or she feels lucky they have not yet been found having an affair. Furthermore, “spring break” is a popular vacation time for American college students and attributing the behaviour of a child to the protagonist due to her duplicity. Additionally, the thrill of infidelity that was explored in previous verses is developed further in the bridge, with the protagonist questioning “what would he do if he found us out?” and imagining a scenario where her husband did find out about her affair only to continue and not put a stop to it. However, the verse has an underlying sense of worry about how upset her husband will be and expecting a shocking reaction from him. This continues with “he’s gonna burn this house to the ground”, signalling the expectation of a violent reaction from her husband. The verse also harks back to the chorus and the metaphor “my house of stone, your ivy grows”, with the “house” metaphorically representing her affair and her husband ‘burning’ it down will put a stop to their affair. The bridge highlights the first time the protagonist has thought, at length, about the implications of her affair, again enforcing her childish and naïve thought process and demonstrating her character as careless.

Unlike *august*, *cardigan*, *betty* and other stories across the two albums, *ivy* is a standalone story with no continuing storylines, meaning that the audience only receives one viewpoint of the tale. However, this does not hinder the impact of both the character and the story, with the story offering an extended insight into the character in order to successfully establish it. Johnny White draws upon this, explaining “by virtue of empathy, by virtue of story, we are able to experience [story] and learn from it without actually going through it” (White, 2011). From *ivy*, the audience learns that the character is unhappy and was previously engaging in an affair in just four minutes and twenty seconds, highlighting Johnny White’s claim that through the means of a successfully established story, the audience can recognise a character and their circumstances.

Two stories from *evermore* that share similar meanings and themes are *champagne problems* and *cowboy like me*. Both tracks detail heartbreak in two varying approaches, portraying both the ‘betrayed’ and the ‘betraying’. From the first verse, the story features frequent references to Swift’s discography in order to pair with the notion of nostalgia that is conveyed throughout the track. One example of this is the protagonist stating “I dropped your hand while dancing” (Swift, 2020b). Historically, Swift uses the motion of dancing in her work to signify vulnerability whilst falling in love, with the relationship often leading to heartbreak. Examples of this include 2010’s *Last Kiss* with “I’m not much for dancing but for you I did” (Swift, 2010) and “dancing round the kitchen in the refrigerator light” in *All Too Well* (Swift, 2012). However, in Swift’s more recent work, dancing has been portrayed as a sign of long-lasting love and trust, conveyed with “you two are dancing in a snow globe round and round” in *You Are in Love* (Swift, 2014) and “dancing like it was the first time” on *Dancing with our Hands Tied* (Swift, 2017). In *champagne problems*, Swift is reverting back to her previous use of dancing, portraying the nostalgia elements to the song and also highlighting the youth of the characters, as it is a device commonly used by Swift earlier in her career. Furthermore, ‘One Single Thread: Tying Song Structures Together’ referred to Swift including the mention of trucks in songs on *evermore*. In *champagne problems*, the protagonist refers to a “Chevy truck” (Swift, 2020b), mirroring the track *Tim McGraw* on Swift’s debut album; “just a boy in a Chevy truck” (Swift, 2006). With the regurgitation of older lyrics and the parallels of Swift’s older song writing, it highlights the age of the characters, with Swift being 17 when *Tim McGraw* was released. Jeffrey Insko draws upon this, stating “Until *evermore*, there hadn’t been a truck in a Taylor Swift song since her eponymous debut” (Insko, 2020). This further conveys Swift reverting to her country roots in order to thoroughly establish characters and stories. The vulnerability portrayed with the use of dancing is further continued with “your heart was glass, I dropped it” (Swift, 2020b), showing the fragility of their relationship as it is made from the tender material of glass. Verbally, Swift sings “I dropped it” quickly after the previous line ends, highlighting the instinct of the protagonist that their relationship was not meant to be. In a 2020 interview, Swift discusses how she was not only telling the stories that she wanted to, but she was also using the language she wanted to; “I was also using words I always wanted to use — kind of bigger, flowerier, prettier words” (Swift, 2020d). Whilst this can be applied

to the deliberate use of the truck in the sense that she wanted to re-visit that particular word, it can be seen in the chorus with the use of “crestfallen on the landing” (Swift, 2020b). Crestfallen is defined as “feeling shame or humiliation: dejected” (“crestfallen”, def. 2), and is an example of Swift using ‘flowerier’ words to convey a sense of character as, rather than using simpler word, the protagonist chooses a ‘bigger’ word, thus indicating she is more educated, linking back to her age. The early verses establish two characters in the story; the ‘betrayed’ and the ‘betrayer’, with the protagonist, the ‘betrayed’, unable to explain why she does not wish to marry, stating “I couldn’t give a reason”. Burts and Harris explain that *evermore* features “characters who assimilate a sense of loss the writer herself can’t process” (Burts and Harris, 2020), something which is portrayed throughout *champagne problems* as a reason is never given for the character’s rejection of the proposal. However, the sudden decisiveness of the character adds to the notion that the protagonist is young, hence the inability to give a reason and being more inclined to follow her feelings and take risks.

The bridge of *champagne problems* is crucial to the overall story, with Swift stating of the song “I love a song where you tell the whole story in the bridge” (Lowe, 2020). Swift develops the characters significantly in the bridge and gives context to the whole story:

“Your Midas touch on the Chevy door,  
November flush and your flannel cure,  
“This dorm was once a madhouse”,  
I made a joke “well it’s made for me” how,  
Evergreen our group of friends,  
Don’t think we’ll say that word again,  
And soon they’ll have the nerve to deck the halls,  
That we once walked through,  
One for the money two for the show,

I never was ready.

So I watched you go” (Swift, 2020b).

In the first line of the bridge, the “Midas touch” (Swift, 2020b) refers to the myth of King Midas, with everything he touched turning to gold. The line is intended as humorous as the opposite of everything turning to gold, due to the protagonist leaving her partner. The protagonist jokes about her mental health, stating that she is perfect for the “madhouse”, which is drawn upon later by those shocked that the protagonist turned down the proposal; “she would’ve made such a lovely bride, what a shame she’s fucked in the head, they said” (Swift, 2020b). This highlights the attitudes of the people surrounding the protagonist as they presume the protagonist must be mentally ill to turn down a proposal from a man. This is also used to develop the characters that surround the protagonist as they are portrayed as very upper-class and snobs, with the extended metaphor of the title “champagne problems”, or ‘first-world problems’, being defined by Merriam-Webster as “problems that, in the larger context of poverty and war, are not important but nonetheless provide issues which must be dealt with” (“first-world problems, def.1). This conveys the attitudes of the protagonist as she is aware that, despite the world’s issues, she has to face this problem, curating her as a self-aware character. In contrast to this, the people surrounding the protagonist are portrayed as rich and self-involved, demonstrated by their attitudes to mental health as well as the various references to wealth throughout; “Dom Perignon”, “your sister splashed out on the bottle” and “your mom’s ring” (Swift, 2020b), all referring to things the wealthy participate in – expensive champagne and family heirlooms.

The bridge also serves as a way for the protagonist to reflect upon her life and examine it, for example “how, evergreen our group of friends, don’t think we’ll say that word again” (Swift, 2020b). “That word” that the character is referring to is the use of “our”, as the protagonist and her ex-partner will no longer share anything, including groups of friends. Similarly, the protagonist attempts to justify her reasoning for leaving with a twist on a nursery rhyme; “one for the money, two for the show, I never was ready so I watched you go”. The original rhyme (“one for the money, two for the show, three to make ready and four to go”) is used as a countdown for races, again enforcing the



imagery of the protagonist running away from her current life. Additionally, twisting the nursery rhyme displays the childish nature of the characters in the story whilst conveying the protagonist as the only self-aware one, further referencing by her reassuring her ex “you won’t remember all my champagne problems” (Swift, 202b). With this, the protagonist is referring to herself and her behaviour as a ‘champagne problem’, conveying that, whilst it may seem like a big problem currently, it will pass and he will move on. With the protagonist conveyed as self-aware, it develops her character to portray a young girl who is not ready for marriage, surrounded by the wealthy who she cannot relate to in the story.

*cowboy like me* tells a similar story of heartbreak to *champagne problems*, however the failure of the relationship stems from lies and the tale features only details the account of one character. In a similar approach to *champagne problems*, *cowboy like me* portrays Swift returning to a country manner of storytelling, with references to cowboys and dancing embedded in the song. The act of dancing, as explored in *champagne problems*, signals vulnerability, with the metaphor re-used in *cowboy like me* as the protagonist states “you asked me to dance and I said ‘dancing is a dangerous game’” (Swift, 2020b). Similar to the protagonist in *champagne problems*, the character established in *cowboy like me* is also self-aware, with the reference to dancing being ‘dangerous’ highlighting the character is aware that dancing will lead to love and heartbreak – two themes explored on the track. The protagonist continues her story with “I thought, it was gonna be one of those things”, showing that the protagonist believed her relationship would be a meaningless thing but now “I know I’m never gonna love again”, detailing the hurt and pain she feels as she has fallen in love and been abandoned. The stereotypical tale of falling in love is twisted in the chorus, with the reveal that both the protagonist and her love are con artists. The various references to this throughout the chorus include “I’ve got some tricks up my sleeve”, conveying the protagonist as a ‘trickster’, tricking people for their money, and “takes one to know one”, showing that the protagonist and her love recognised each other for what they both were – con artists – and foregrounds the protagonist’s love as being a liar from the outset. Furthermore, the use of ‘cowboy’ throughout the song is a deliberate allusion to outlaws, who often partake in behaviour that is not dissimilar to aforementioned con artists. This is

also indicative of Swift drawing upon her country roots, since ‘cowboys’ are figures associated with country music and culture.

The protagonist continues “never wanted love, just a fancy car” (Swift, 2020b), highlighting that she was only ever interested in money and valuable possessions, not a relationship, and now she is without either. Following this, she states “now I’m waiting by the phone like I’m sitting in an airport bar”, with the metaphor signifying how the protagonist feels she is waiting around for something that feels like it will never arrive, again portraying her as self-aware as she knows her love has fled due to their background as a con artist. The protagonist details her career, now ironic as she has become a victim of a con herself; “perched in the dark, telling all the rich folks anything they wanna hear”. Although she fell for the lies of another con artist, this verse again re-enforces the notion that the protagonist is self-aware of the irony as she was told the things she wanted to hear. Furthermore, the use of “in the dark” refers to how the protagonist regularly leaves her victims suddenly and now she is ‘in the dark’ on the fate of her relationship. She continues “it could be love, I could be the way forward only if they pay for it”, further demonstrating what the protagonist regularly tells her victims. The use of the conditional clauses “could” and “if” highlights that she never tells anything her victims anything definite and thus is not surprised by her abandonment as it was never definite. The protagonist then moves on to describe her love; “never thought I’d meet you here” as she was surprised to have encountered someone so similar to herself. The protagonist then switches her account of her victims to apply to herself, stating “it could be love, we could be the way forward and I know I’ll pay for it”. The use of “we” rather than the originally used “I” shows the protagonist was ready to embrace the new relationship but now she is ‘paying’ emotionally for her foolish mistake, as her victims paid for their mistakes with money. With this, Swift is carefully curating a criminal character, but allowing the audience to feel sympathy for her due to the details of the story.

The bridge of *cowboy like me* marks the climax of the song, with the protagonist stating “the skeletons in both our closets plotted hard to fuck this up” (Swift, 2020b), showing that the two lovers’ pasts were ruining their present as they were unable to trust each other. The protagonist then details the two lovers’ pasts, referring to hers as “the old men that I’ve swindled really did believe I was the

one” which is now ironic as she was swindled by someone she believed loved her. The protagonist describes her lover with “the ladies lunching have their stories about when you passed through town”, illustrating that she heard first-hand accounts about the heartbreak her lover has caused other women and chose to ignore it. She attempts to excuse her lover’s behaviour as it was prior to him meeting her, stating “that was before I locked it down” showing she was open to discarding his past and focus on their present. As in *champagne problems*, *cowboy like me* references an ancient myth with the use of “you hang from my lips like the Gardens of Babylon”, which was a wonder of the ancient world. This highlights that, although their relationship is over, it was beautiful and she is clinging onto the last remnants of the relationship. The use of the metaphor is also another example of Swift using flowerier and prettier words as previously cited. However, this comes in the form of a metaphor in *cowboy like me*, used to portray the initial beauty of the relationship. The protagonist ends the story with more details of the emotional con she experienced, stating “forever is the sweetest con... I’m never gonna love again”. With this, the protagonist is referencing that, although monetary cons hurt, being sold a romantic dream and making her feel loved is the best way to gain someone’s trust and clearly remembers her lover fondly, however she is now closed off to love in the future. The character Swift establishes in *cowboy like me* is similar to the other female characters discussed within the chapter, as she looks out for her best interests but still ends up getting hurt through her own actions.

Donna W. Emery emphasised the features of a character that are deemed necessary for an audience to understand the character; “character states, such as their desires, feelings, thoughts and beliefs, are the glue that ties the actions of the story together” (Emery, 534). Although the protagonist of *ivy* makes her desires, feelings and thoughts very clear throughout the story, *champagne problems* and *cowboy like me* portrays their characters as slightly more ambiguous in reference to their desires, thoughts and feelings. This foregrounds that Swift does not need to develop a character’s state in order for the audience and critics to understand the character’s story, contrary to Emery’s theory. Furthermore, despite exploring similar themes of heartbreak and lost love throughout *folklore* and *evermore*, Swift is able to curate characters that are identifiable and having distinguishable stories.

## The Maddest Woman: Taylor Swift as a Character

On *folklore* and *evermore*, Taylor Swift relies heavily on the previously discussed characters to take up a large portion of the storytelling on the albums. However, as with many of Swift's albums, Swift still includes snippets of her life within the songs – both obvious and subliminal. Zane Lowe acknowledged this in an interview with Swift, stating “you’ve kind of lived all of these lives” (Lowe, 2020) when referring to stories of heartbreak and betrayal. An example of Swift including snippets of her life on the album is portrayed on *the lakes*. Swift previously discussed her anniversary trip to the Lake District on the *folklore* track *invisible string* – which, as examined, references her life at length. Without the track, the audience would never place so much expectation of truth in lyrics from *the lakes* such as “I’ve come too far to watch some namedropping sleaze, tell me what are my words worth” (Swift, 2020a). The lyric, like many on the albums, refers to her musical battle with Scooter Braun, the owner of her Masters recordings, and Scott Borchetta, her previous record label executive. Although Swift does not rely on her life to do a lot of the storytelling on the albums, describing herself as “a writer who only wrote very diaristic songs” (Lowe), there are songs that are completely focused on her as a character. This is referenced in the prologue of the *folklore* album booklet, with Swift writing “I found myself not only writing my own stories...” (Swift, 2020a, 1), acknowledging that her life still appears in some form on the album. Jonathan Ellis drew upon this when discussing the albums stating “in the realm of autofiction, no one is safe, especially not the authors themselves” (Ellis, 2020). Although autofiction, defined as “a genre of fiction that is heavily influenced by the life experience of the author” (“autofiction”, def. 1), is something featured on heavily throughout Swift's discography, her approach to autofiction on *folklore* and *evermore* is different; she is delving more into the negative side of celebrity and her feelings whilst portraying herself as a character on the albums.

It is crucial to note that, on *folklore* and *evermore*, Swift is reflecting on situations she has already discussed at length, such as her public feuds with Kanye West and Scooter Braun, and re-telling them differently to convey emotions Swift had not previously expressed. Burt and Harris said of *folklore* “Most of the fifteen internet-available tracks look back to some failure in her past” (Burt and Harris,

2020). The self-referral and reflection of Swift as a character relates to the album name of *folklore*, with Swift writing in the prologue of the *folklore* album booklet “a tale that becomes folklore is one that is passed down and whispered about. Sometimes even sung about” (Swift, 2020a, 1). Taylor Swift, as a character, is already a tale of folklore due to her reputation in the media for her celebrity friends, feuds and relationships. By stating that folklore tales are “even sung about” appears, on the surface, to reference the album as a whole, but also refers to her own back catalogue of diaristic songs about the public’s perception of her, such as *Blank Space* (2014) and *Look What You Made Me Do* (2017). Swift uses *folklore* and *evermore* to re-examine aspects of her character and reflect on them differently, thus passing the song down as a tale, with Nicky Watkinson stating “one of the central tools she relies on for authorship is revision: Swift is constantly revising herself and her work” (Watkinson, 2021). The notion of Swift ‘constantly revising herself’ plays into the idea that she is creating a mythologised character of herself in attempts to separate Swift the person and Swift the character and celebrity.

In the stories told on *folklore* and *evermore*, aspects of Swift’s life are woven in to the narratives on various songs. The song *coney island* features references to Swift’s songs about her ex-boyfriends in the bridge; “were you standing in the hallway, with a big cake, happy birthday” (Swift, 2020b). This refers to Swift’s 2012 song *The Moment I Knew*, in which she sings “you should’ve been here... they’re all standing around me singing ‘happy birthday to you’, but there was one thing missing” (Swift, 2012). The song details Swift’s then-partner not turning up at her birthday party, with the song rumoured to be about her ex-boyfriend Jake Gyllenhaal. *coney island* continues “did I paint your bluest skies the darkest grey?” (Swift, 2020b). This is a reference to Swift’s song *Dear John*, in which she writes “you paint me a blue sky, and go back and turn it to rain” (Swift, 2010) about John Mayer. *coney Island* also refers to Swift’s snowmobile accident with her ex-boyfriend Harry Styles, which she wrote about in her 2014 song *Out of The Woods* (“remember when you hit the brakes too soon? Twenty stitches in a hospital room”) (Swift, 2014); “and when I got into the accident, the sight that flashed before me was your face” (Swift, 2020b). The final reference is not to a song, but an event in Swift’s life; “but when I walked up to the podium, I think that I forgot to say your name”. This is a

reference to Swift's Grammy win for Album of the Year in 2015, when she didn't thank her partner at the time Calvin Harris. Although *coney island* only features eight verses that reflect Swift's life and music, a very personal meaning can be derived from the verses in order to assist the establishment of Swift as a character on the song. Stephanie Burts draws upon this: "one of the central tools she relies on for authorship is revision: Swift is constantly revising herself and her work" (Burts and Harris, 2020). By using Watkinson and Burts's calling Swift's approach to music a 'constant revision', it is clear that Swift's aim is to reapproach her previous work and 'pass it on' through the means of the albums and the crafting on a "personal myth". Bonnie Swift writes of a personal myth:

"Rather, crafting a personal myth is an interpretive operation, which draws on a highly selective and reorganized version of the past. Our personal myths are full of biases, distortions, and mistakes. These mistakes aren't necessarily conscious, it's just that certain embellishments are inherent to the storytelling process. In order to narrativize the past, we have to smooth things over a bit, sharpen pivotal transitions, add drama, tension, resolution..." (B. Swift)

The idea of a personal myth relates to the re-visiting of old material on the albums, such as Swift's love life and feuds, as Swift is passing down the tales of her life and mythologising them. Although the audience is familiar with the stories, and Swift's overall character, the fresh details added to tracks such as *evermore* create additional tension and drama in a situation that has been long resolved.

Another topic which Swift refers to at length on the albums is the ownership of her Masters recordings and her public feud with the new owner Scooter Braun. Swift has previously discussed the ownership of her Masters in a lengthy Tumblr post in which she states that she was given the option to earn her Masters records back with each new albums she records for her old record label Big Machine Records (Swift, 2019a). It is likely this that Swift is referring to in the opening line of *mad woman*, writing "what did you think I'd say to that?" (Swift, 2020a). With this, Swift is questioning what her old record label executives expected when almost bribing her to stay with the record label, prior to the sale of her Masters. Also addressed in the Tumblr post is Scooter Braun's behaviour towards Swift, with Swift stating that he has bullied her publicly for years. This is highlighted in the second line of

*mad woman*; “does a scorpion sting when fighting back?”. In this rhetorical question, Swift is asking how Braun thought she wouldn’t defend herself against him. Swift famously stated in the 2010s that “if guys don’t want me to write bad songs about them, they shouldn’t do bad things” (Swift, 2009). This quote is still applicable years later, with the meaning being turned from songs about love and heartbreak to, as seen on *folklore* and *evermore*, betrayal and business, highlighting the growth of Taylor Swift the character on the dual albums. The song further references Braun as the “master of spin” (Swift, 2020a), due to his ownership of her recordings. This, again, evokes a significant difference in Swift’s earlier work when she is writing about someone who hurt her and *folklore* and *evermore*, in which she is much more subtle and metaphorical, again representing her growth as both a storyteller and as a character who can write about non-fictional situations in a more subtle manner but still evoke the same meaning. Ann Powers of NPR drew attention to this, stating “because these songs are still very confessional. Yes, she takes on different characters, but she is still writing about her own situation — she’s just doing it in a way that’s a little more sophisticated” (Thompson et al, 2020). With the alteration of her storytelling technique, it adds a variety of meanings to the song and allows it to become more complex rather than overtly referring to Swift and who the song is about. *my tears ricochet* also refers to the ownership of her Masters, particularly with the bridge; “when you can’t sleep at night, you hear my stolen lullabies” (Swift, 2020a). ‘Stolen lullabies’ is a metaphor for possessing ownership of her songs which, in Swift’s opinion, he has no right to own. Nicky Watkinson addresses the characterisation of Swift on the albums with “the self she constructs in her music relies on the existence of an other, whether that is the subject of the song or an unknown listener” (Watkinson, 2019). On the albums, Swift carefully creates a character of herself that embodies, subtly, the struggles she has experienced or is currently experiencing. However, as Watkinson states, the understanding of the Taylor Swift character relies on some form of knowledge of whom she is talking about, therefore there are two layers to each story Swift tells about herself; the one which can be understood on a very basic level, such as *my tears ricochet* being about an enemy turning up at her funeral, or the layer of understanding the details Swift hides within her songs to address things that are going on in her life. This highlights that the portrayal of Swift as a character on the albums is less obvious than in her previous work and more focused on acknowledging what she

was going through in a particular situation, as opposed to disclosing the feelings of others and creating them as characters on the albums.

Swift acknowledges the struggle she feels as a woman in the music industry on the track *mirrorball*. Swift states of *mirrorball* in the *long pond studio sessions*; “I’ve never been a natural all I do is try, try, try... is that too true?” (Swift, 2020c). This is the first time Swift has discussed the topic of the pressure she feels as musician, but she previously discussed it at length in her 2020 documentary *Miss Americana* with Swift explaining, as she approached 30, that;

“Women in entertainment are discarded in an elephant graveyard by the time they’re 35. The female artists that I know of have reinvented themselves 20 times more than the male artists. They have to. Constantly having to reinvent, constantly finding new facets of yourself that people find to be shiny” (Swift, 2020c)

The idea of re-inventing herself to be “shiny” is reflected in *mirrorball*, with Swift defining a mirrorball itself as “they are broken a million times and that’s what makes them so shiny... it’s a metaphor for celebrity” (Swift, 2020e). The notion that Swift is the titular mirrorball, combined with her comments in *Miss Americana* of re-inventing herself and starting anew for each album, foregrounds the pressures of being a woman in the music industry. Prior to *folklore* and *evermore*, Swift said of her 2019 album *Lover* that “this is probably one of my last opportunities as an artist to grasp onto that kind of success” (Swift, 2020c). Although *folklore* and *evermore* went on to break music records, receive accolades and high amount of praise from critics and public, it is crucial to the understanding of *mirrorball* that the pressure that Swift faces as an artist is acknowledged. Swift explicitly writes in *mirrorball* “I want you to know, I’m a mirrorball” (Swift, 2020a), thus informing the audience immediately that she is the character at the centre of the song and this is her account. Swift’s speech in *Miss Americana* about having to reinvent herself is exemplified in the chorus of *mirrorball* with “you’ll find me on my tallest tiptoes, spinning in my highest heels, love, shing just for you”. The use of superlatives with “tallest” and “highest” emphasises that Swift is always trying so hard to impress others, with the “you” in the chorus referring to both the general public and the music industry as a whole. Referring back to Nicky Watkinson’s claim that “the self she constructs in her



music relies on the existence of an other, whether that is the subject of the song or an unknown listener” (Watkinson, 2019), the “other” in *mirrorball* is the pressures put on Swift by the music industry, with Swift’s character in *mirrorball* discussing this throughout the song, thus ‘relying’ on it. Furthermore, the repetition of “I’ll show you every version of yourself tonight” (Swift, 2020a) refers to the different appearances Swift takes on in her various ‘eras’; for example, a cowboy aesthetic when promoting her debut album *Taylor Swift* (2006) or her short hair and red lipstick when she released *1989* (2014). These changing appearances have become synonymous with their associated albums and re-enforce Swift’s claim that she is “constantly having to reinvent” (Swift, 2020d), with different ‘versions’ of herself existing. In addition to portraying her character as a constantly evolving artist who is broken inside, Swift acknowledges what happens to the character when they no longer need to evolve.

Swift draws attention to the COVID-19 pandemic in the bridge of the *mirrorball* with “they called off the circus, burned the disco down, when they sent home the horses, and the rodeo clowns” (Swift, 2020a). The verse is one of few references to the current time period on both albums, and draws upon what happens to an artist when they are no longer in public trying to ‘shine’ for people as a mirrorball does. Swift explains that she wrote *mirrorball* after she found out her tour was cancelled (Swift, 2020e), with “the circus” (Swift, 2020a) being a metaphor for a live show where, as at a circus, she puts on a spectacle show and performs. Swift continues the metaphor of performance and pressure in the bridge, stating “I’m still on that tightrope, I’m still trying everything to get you laughing at me”. With this, Swift is referring to the writing process of *folklore*, drawing attention to the fact that, whilst the world is in lockdown, she is still trying to hold people’s attention in a fear of being forgotten. Additionally, the imagery of Swift on “that tightrope” foregrounds that Swift feels her career is her walking on a tightrope, where someone is up high for everyone to see, and one wrong move could lead to her falling off. The bridge delves into Swift’s fear of, as she states in *Miss Americana*, being “discarded” (Swift, 2020d) when she is not in the public’s view. However, Swift turns this fear and constant re-invention around for *evermore*, which extends the elements she explored on *folklore*. Swift explained in the prologue of the *evermore* album booklet “in the past I’ve

always treated albums as one-off eras and moved on... there was something different with *folklore*” (Swift, 2020b, 1). By choosing not to treat *folklore* as a one-off and continue to write about herself as a character, Swift is not adding another “version” of herself and is subverting the expectations of the music industry and the public by not re-inventing her sound or herself, thus adding another meaning to the character portrayed in *mirrorball* as that no longer represents many aspects of Taylor Swift.

On *evermore*, the titular song also portrays Swift’s life and, again, addresses her feud with Kanye West. As Burt and Harris explained “everything’s a return to something, a rewrite, a re-take, a retraction, a chance to remember and do it again” (Burt and Harris, 2020), with Swift often referencing the situation with West on the albums in songs such as *hoax*, *peace* and now *evermore*. Prior to *folklore* and *evermore*, Swift had approached the situation from a humorous angle rather than exploring the situation seriously and how it made her feel. By returning to the situation on the albums, Swift is placing emphasis on the negative impact it had on both the view of her on behalf of the public and the view she had of herself. It is also important to note that Swift collaborates with her partner Joe Alwyn on the song, under the pseudonym William Bowery, meaning that Alwyn’s view of Swift from that time when the events unfolded offers another layer to Swift’s character in the song from the perspective of a third person, in certain parts perhaps making it more authentic and truthful. Additionally, *evermore* falls under the ‘Me, Myself and I’ definition of storytelling, defined as “often told in the first person as a personal reflection” (Fosbraey & Melrose, 165), meaning Alwyn’s contributions ensure an accurate personal reflection of Swift during that time period. The opening line of the track “Gray November” (Swift, 2020b), reminiscent of the love song – *Call It What You Want* - Swift wrote for Alwyn on her sixth studio album *reputation*; “I recall late November, holding my breath, slowly, I said, you don’t have to save me, but would you run away with me?” (Swift, 2017). The comparison of Swift’s two accounts of the same time period reflects Burt and Harris’s previously mentioned “re-write, a re-take” (Burt and Harris, 2020), with Swift altering the previously established narrative, one of love, to portray a more realistic view of the time, not one of love but one of unhappiness. Additionally, Swift asking Alwyn to run away with her in *Call It What You Want* further develops the character of Taylor Swift in November 2016, as she is unhappy – signified by “Gray

November” (Swift, 2020b) – and in hiding with Alwyn, developing the story in *Call It What You Want* and making it a tale of sadness. Swift continues to portray her sadness in *evermore* with “I’ve been down since July, motion capture put me in a bad light”. With this, Swift is directly referencing the highly publicised video of her and Kanye West’s phone call that became public in July 2016 and led to a negative view of her on behalf of the public as she was portrayed in a “bad light”. Swift chooses to focus on her feelings and experiences of the situation during this period, with Summer Kin Lee drawing upon this; “these [autobiographical] songs stay rooted in the particular and person... [and] bring us back to Swift herself” (Lee, 2020). Swift has previously written songs about Kanye West, such as *Innocent* (2010), and has, in the past, stated “it was important for me to write a song to him” (qtd in Dinh, 2010). However, with *evermore*, Swift is not writing to any other person but herself, highlighting Lee’s point of the personal tracks on the album only rooted in Swift’s view and feelings of the situation. Swift continues to address her feelings, repeatedly stating in the chorus that “I had a feeling so peculiar, that this pain would be for evermore” (Swift, 2020b), further emphasising the pain she felt when she was ostracised by the public. However, Swift flips the negative narrative to focus on her and Alwyn’s relationship in a parallel to *Call It What You Want*. She states of their relationship “it was real enough, to get me through, I swear, you were there”. Swift is shifting the focus of her character to credit Alwyn for “getting her through” the hard times, and that he supported her during that time just as he is supporting her now by adding instrumentals and vocals to her album. It is thus evident that *evermore* serves as a purposeful bookend of Swift discussing her relationship with West and continuing to focus on Alwyn, with the last line of the track being “this pain wouldn’t be for evermore”, highlighting the importance of Alwyn to Swift’s character.

Taylor Swift’s character on *folklore* and *evermore* draw attention to many of her well-documented relationships. On the albums, Swift chooses to readdress the relationships from only the perspective of her character and re-tells stories which she previously portrayed differently, such as her and Kanye West’s feud, or to acknowledge past situations – as illustrated in *coney island* – to signify her growth both as a character in these stories but also as her role of the storyteller and a personal myth. Bonnie Swift conveyed that “it is not through experience alone that we become who we are, but through the

creative act of storytelling that we glean a sense of meaning, identity, and power from our past experience.” (B. Swift), thus highlighting that Taylor Swift’s character, through the art of storytelling, gains meaning from the understanding of her past life experiences that she re-visits on the albums.

## Conclusion

By closely examining how Taylor Swift's *folklore* and *evermore* uses stories to establish characters, and vice versa, this dissertation has attempted to define the exploration of stories and characters within music.

The structure of a song has been proven to be crucial to the way stories and characters are recognised by the audience, with the linear structure of *no body, no crime* supporting its tale of infidelity and murder due to the telling of a traditional crime story and possessing country themes. However, *invisible string* benefitted from a more creative structure to tell Taylor Swift and Joe Alwyn's love story, allowing Swift to reflect upon her life experiences in the verses as the chorus serves as an anchor to the present. The examination of structure has also highlighted that one album or text does not need to stick to a specific structure in order to establish a story or a character, therefore encouraging artists to experiment with structure.

Continuing stories is something, prior to *folklore*, that Taylor Swift had never experimented with. However, this dissertation has established that, not only can song characters move on into other songs, but also can be carried over to additional albums. Furthermore, Swift easily creates characters that can exist on their own tracks, forming an understandable storyline that the audience responds to during the track time. Taylor Swift also chooses to include herself as a character on the albums and re-visit situations that she has previously addressed in a different manner in order to establish a clear story and narrative from her point of view.

Overall, this dissertation has expanded upon the definitions of story and character in relation to Swift's writing and offers a critical analysis of the themes explored within *folklore* and *evermore*.

## Works Cited

- "Autofiction." Collinsdictionary.com, Collins English Dictionary, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/autofiction>. Accessed 14 Sept 2021.
- "Crestfallen." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crestfallen>. Accessed 10 Sep. 2021.
- "First world problem." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/first%20world%20problem>. Accessed 10 Sep. 2021.
- Arestad, Zachary. "That Ain't Country: Discourses Of Authenticity In America's Most Popular Genre". Swarthmore College, 2017.
- Bradley, Adam. *The Poetry Of Pop*. Yale University Press, 2017, pp. 276 - 301.
- Burt, Stephanie, and Julia Harris. "Growing Sideways, Gazing Back". *Post45*, 2020, <https://post45.org/2020/12/growing-sideways-gazing-back/>. Accessed 11 Apr 2021.
- Del Negro, Janice. *Storytelling: Art And Technique*. 5th ed., Libraries Unlimited, 2021, p. 3.
- Dinh, James. "Taylor Swift On Kanye West: 'It Was Important To Write A Song To Him'". *MTV News*, 2010, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1649743/taylor-swift-on-kanye-west-it-was-important-to-write-a-song-to-him/>.
- Doyle, Patrick. "Musicians On Musicians: Paul McCartney & Taylor Swift". *Rolling Stone*, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/paul-mccartney-taylor-swift-musicians-on-musicians-1089058/>. Accessed 17 July 2021.
- Ellis, Jonathan. "Introduction: From Folklore To Evermore". *Post45*, 2020, <https://post45.org/2020/12/introduction-from-folklore-to-evermore/>.
- Emery, Donna W. "Helping Readers Comprehend Stories From The Characters' Perspectives". *The Reading Teacher*, vol 49, no. 7, 1996, pp. 534 - 541. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20201661>. Accessed 20 July 2021.

Fosbraey, Glenn, and Andrew Melrose. *Writing Song Lyrics: Creative and Critical Approaches*. Red Globe Press, 2019, pp. 159 - 173.

Insko, Jeffrey. "Somethin' 'Bout A Truck". *Post45*, 2020, <https://post45.org/2020/12/somethin-bout-a-truck/>.

Jones, Nate. "Untangling Taylor Swift'S 'Teenage Love Triangle' Trilogy". *Vulture*, 2020, <https://www.vulture.com/2020/08/folklore-love-triangle-explained.html>.

Lee, Summer Kin. "Bad Songs About Bad Things". *Post45*, 2020, <https://post45.org/2020/12/bad-songs-about-bad-things/>.

Lowe, Zane. "Taylor Swift". *The Zane Lowe Interview Series*, 2021. Accessed 18 Aug 2021.

Mylrea, Hannah. "Taylor Swift's Surprise New Album 'Evermore' – The Big Talking Points". *NME*, 2020, <https://www.nme.com/blogs/taylor-swift-evermore-talking-points-marjorie-finlay-2836986>.

Negus, Keith. "Narrative, Interpretation, And The Popular Song". *The Musical Quarterly*, vol 95, no. 2/3, 2012. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/musqtl/gds021>. Accessed 8 Sept 2021.

NPR Music. *Taylor Swift: NPR Music Tiny Desk Concert*. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FvVnP8G6ITs>. Accessed 13 June 2021.

Swift, Bonnie. "Crafting A Personal Myth". *Bonnie Swift*, <https://www.bonnieswift.com/written/crafting-a-personal-myth>.

Swift, Taylor. "1989". Big Machine Records, 2014.

Swift, Taylor. "Evermore". Republic Records, 2020.

Swift, Taylor. "Folklore". Republic Records, 2020.

Swift, Taylor. "Lover". Republic Records, 2019.

Swift, Taylor. "Red". Big Machine Records, 2012.

Swift, Taylor. "Reputation". Big Machine Records, 2017.

Swift, Taylor. "Speak Now". Big Machine Records, 2010.

Swift, Taylor. "Taylor Swift". Big Machine Records, 2006.

Swift, Taylor. *Folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions*. Taylor Swift Productions, 2020.

Swift, Taylor. *Taylor Swift - Forever & Always Interview*. 2009,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCR8ZZ8oRtI>. Accessed 9 Sept 2021.

Swift, Taylor. *Tumblr*, 2019, <https://taylorswift.tumblr.com/post/185958366550/for-years-i-asked-pleaded-for-a-chance-to-own-my>.

TEDx Talks. *Psychologically, We Are Our Stories | Jonny White | Tedxhalifax*. 2011,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_qzxn9L0eRA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qzxn9L0eRA). Accessed 23 Aug 2021.

Thompson, Stephen et al. "Let's Talk About Taylor Swift's 'Folklore'". *Npr.Org*, 2020,  
<https://www.npr.org/2020/07/28/896193188/taylor-swift-folklore-critics-roundtable>. Accessed 20 Aug 2021.

Watkinson, Nicky. "'Write This Down': (Re-)Writing The Self In Taylor Swift's Music". 2021.

Watkinson, Nicky. "'When They Point To The Pictures, / Please Tell Them My Name': Taylor Swift's Self-Authorship". *Medium*, 2019, <https://medium.com/@nicky.watkinson/when-they-point-to-the-pictures-please-tell-them-my-name-taylor-swift-s-self-authorship-e76c32e04e09>.

Wilson, Lana. *Miss Americana*. Tremolo Productions, 2020.